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ABSTRACT

The occurrence of misleading cognates in the English compositions of students whose first language is Spanish can lead to a significant failure of communication between non-Spanish-speaking teachers and their students. Such a failure can produce attitudinal changes in both teacher and student that are potentially destructive to the learning process. A paragraph contrived by the author which is especially rich in misused cognates, all of them recurrent in the writings of his students, is presented in illustration of the problem. Copies of the paragraph were given to a group of college instructors who teach composition, and the critiques that some of them offered show the "cognate trap" in operation. The suggestion is made that bilingual resource people be an essential staff component of any department responsible for the teaching of English as a second language. (Author/KM)

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THE COGNATE TRAP IN WRITING BY HISPANIC STUDENTS

by

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THE COGNATE TRAP IN WRITING BY HISPANIC STUDENTS

How important is it for a teacher of ESL to be well grounded in the native language or languages of his students? It seems to me that in the case of our Hispanic students, whom I have been teaching for some time now at the City University of New York, the lack of a Spanish-language background in an instructor of English composition could be embarrassing indeed. I venture to say that the same holds true for the teaching of composition to students whose native tongue is French, Italian, or Portuguese. I do not deny the importance of methodology in the teaching of English as a second language, but no matter what his methodological sophistication, a teacher unversed in the languages of the above groups of students is bound to reach a point at which communication ceases and misunderstanding is inevitable.

Take, for example, the cognate trap -- a trap both for the student and for the linguistically uninitiated instructor. Cognates -- words in the same or different languages that have a common origin -- frequently both look alike and mean much the same thing, as do Spanish aventura and English "adventure." But what about those misleading cognates that look alike yet do not mean the same thing? An obvious example would be Spanish idioma (language) and English "idiom." What sort of "trap" do such cognates set for the unprepared

instructor? Most composition teachers would reply that there would be no trap at all because the context would expose the error in usage. How wonderful to be able to rely on the context! But this is to assume a clarity and coherence in the general body of our students' writing which we know by experience is not generally evident.

No, the context is frequently not to be relied on. And to depend on an ambiguous context to illuminate an ambiguous choice of words is to hunt ignotus per ignotum. The fact is that instructors frequently fall into the "cognate trap," and they never know it, sometimes even in the clearest of contexts, because they assume that the student means in English literally what he has written in English. Often the instructor does indeed recognize a logical inconsistency of thought over the course of a few sentences or even a whole composition, but rarely will he recognize the true cause of the inconsistency -- trouble with cognates. The student will therefore be accused of incoherence, a much graver problem than he actually has, and he will be unable to defend himself because he will not understand what it is in his writing that the instructor has failed to understand. The result of such a failure of communication is likely to be a residue of scorn or pedagogical despair on the teacher's part and resentment combined with intensified feelings of inferiority on the part of the student, who is culturally already at a disadvantage in his new environment.

I think that the little scene I have just sketched happens more often than we instructors realize -- at least, to those of us not conversant with Spanish (or whatever might be the first language of our students in which cognates with English abound). I have come to this conclusion because, in the course of reading hundreds of compositions written by ESL students, I have been able to spot many a potential cognate trap that would undoubtedly snare any instructor unable to think fairly fluently in Spanish. Being able to spot these traps has obviated a great deal of confusion that would otherwise have arisen between me and my students.

There will be those skeptics (mostly among teachers who do not know the native languages of their students) who doubt the existence of any significant degree of failure in communication that is caused by the cognate trap. For their benefit, let me illustrate the potential seriousness of the problem by means of an admittedly artificial example. The artificialness of my example, however, is limited solely to its composite nature, for it incorporates a good number of very common cognate traps I have stumbled upon time and again in dealing with the writing of my Hispanic students.[1] Cognate errors are unlikely ever to occur naturally in such abundance within the bounds of any one paragraph, but two or three

[1] I have also included a few common mistranslations into English of a non-cognate nature. Non-cognate errors diminish rapidly in occurrence as a student progresses in learning English, whereas the cognate variety of error tends to linger and is difficult to eradicate. The surface similarity between the words in both languages induces a kind of lexical laziness in the learner.

do occur often enough in any one paragraph, and even one such misleading cognate can skew the whole course of a composition's meaning, especially if encountered in a fuzzy context that could easily compound the possibilities of misunderstanding.

In the following example, the teacher without a Spanish-language background will at times feel totally at sea and at others assume he grasps the thread of the discourse. However, just when he thinks he understands the student's point he is likely to be wrong. The teacher will occasionally think the student is contradicting himself or is incoherent, whereas the (imaginary) student is thinking throughout with entirely logical consistency. Here is the paragraph, after which I offer the same paragraph with cognate traps capitalized and the proper English word following in parentheses:[2]

> In general, I like college, but I am very preoccupied about my history class. My history professor is not sympathetic to the students because he is too fastidious. In fact, no one can see him. I hate his conferences, but the lectures are interesting even though the classes are not. Some say he is

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[2]The paragraph contains twenty-two cognate traps (including some that are repeated) and four non-cognate word mistranslations of a sort a student could get from misuse of a dictionary or just literal Spanish-English translation. In the glossed paragraph, the non-cognate errors are italicized rather than capitalized.

a relevant person because he has traduced Unamuno. He is pretending to write books about other Spanish writers also. Maybe he is smart and profound, but I do not enjoy even looking at him because he has a common view. His formation is impressive, but he is badly educated because he always has discussions with students in his class. In the past, everybody tolerated such a teacher, but actually you don't have to. Actually, I do not assist very much at his conferences, but I make work for him whenever I can. I already lost one of his examinations and I am sure I do not approve. I would sure like to finish one career in history, but I am afraid to because I can not defend myself in his class. In conclusion, I have pretended to give you the reasons why my history professor is not sympathetic.

The same paragraph, now internally glossed, reads much more coherently as follows:

In general, I like college, but I am very PREOCCUPIED (worried) about my history class. My history professor is not SYMPATHETIC (likable) to the students because he is too FASTIDIOUS (boring). In fact, no one can <u>see</u> (stand) him. I hate his CONFERENCES (lectures), but the LECTURES (readings) are interesting even though the classes are not. Some say he is a RELEVANT (prominent) person because he has TRADUCED (translated) Unamuno. He is PRETENDING (aspiring) to write

books about other Spanish writers also. Maybe he is smart and profound, but I do not enjoy even looking at him because he has a COMMON (ordinary) view (appearance). His FORMATION (education) is impressive, but he is BADLY EDUCATED (ill-bred) because he always has DISCUSSIONS (arguments) with students in his class. In the past, everybody tolerated such a teacher, but ACTUALLY (nowadays) you don't have to. ACTUALLY (nowadays), I do not ASSIST (attend) very much at[3] his CONFERENCFS (lectures), but I make (do) work for him whenever I can. I already lost (missed) one of his examinations and I am sure I do not APPROVE (pass). I would sure like to finish ONE CAREER (a major) in history, but I am afraid to because I can not DEFEND MYSELF (get along) in his class. In conclusion, I have PRETENDED (tried) to give you the reasons why my history professcr is not SYMPATHETIC (likable).

I handed out copies of the unglossed version of this paragraph to some of my composition-teaching colleagues, one of whom is perfectly bilingual, whereas the others are not Spanish-speaking.

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[3]Naturally, the proper English word can not always be substituted without necessitating other phrasal and syntactical changes. The present exercise in substitution is intended only to illuminate the problem, not to perfect the style.

Some teach ESL students almost exclusively, others not at all, but even the latter have many students who fall by accident or administrative necessity into a regular English course although they would probably be better served in an ESL group. I informed the teachers that the paragraph was "written by a Hispanic ESL student" (some sensed immediately, however, that it was a highly "doctored" writing sample) and asked them if they would criticize it in detail.

The critiques elicited from those teachers who cooperated indicated that an awareness of cognate traps would have prevented larger-scale misdiagnoses of our imaginary student's writing problems. The range of reactions ran from immediate and full insight to a frustrated tossing up of the hands. Our perfectly bilingual instructor, in a cursory examination of the paragraph, saw immediately that the (fictive) student's difficulty lay not in his thinking process but in cognate-interference.

Another teacher, one who neither speaks Spanish nor teaches ESL, lit upon only about one-third of the actual errors of word-choice and guessed the true English equivalent in only two or three instances. His atypical reaction, however, the wisest of those offered by the non-Spanish-speaking group of instructors, was to write: "I would not return a paper like this cold. I would work in conference to see if I could discover what <u>he</u> thinks he means. I can only guess at most of the misused words and resulting lack of logic." The particular insight of this instructor is to see clearly enough that the paper's lack of logic did not stem from

the thinking process but from the misuse of words. His wisdom lies in wishing to suspend judgment until conferring with the student personally.

Another non-Spanish-speaking instructor (who, however, has considerable experience teaching ESL) spotted over fifty percent of the misused words and suggested the proper English equivalent for over one third of the twenty-six built-in errors, relying as much as he could on the context for clarification of the meaning. Nevertheless, as shrewd a reader as he was, he failed to see that it was vocabulary alone that hampered communication and summed up the problems as "a) severely muddled vocabulary" and "b) faulty arguments."

Another instructor, one who neither speaks Spanish nor teaches ESL, also underlined over fifty percent of the usage errors, considering them "close to but not exactly the ones you want." The fact is, however, that the vast majority of the misused words are not at all close in meaning to the proper English words that are needed. The instructor therefore wound up taking what the student wrote too much at face value. She assumed, for example, that "conferences" and "lectures" were to be taken literally, and the resulting suggestion for revision was the following: "Your paper might be more interesting if you could discuss each aspect of the professor's work in a separate

paragraph -- that is, his lectures, his conferences, his exams." The consequence of a suggestion like this, in any rewriting the "student" might do, would be further to compound the undetected initial confusion.

Another instructor assumed that the entire linguistic education of our make-believe student was to blame for the paper's murkiness, and he concluded that the poor fellow was now just about a hopeless case. "If I came upon such a paper as this," the instructor writes, "I'd have serious reservations about inflicting further 'education' on such a student. He's obviously suffered from drills of the wrong kind -- for example, learning words to increase vocabulary at the expense of meaning. He has learned sentence structure and pattern, but once again, or so it seems to me, has not learned how to communicate with meaning. 'Correcting' such a paper adds futility to error." The attitude of this instructor clearly is such as to widen rather than narrow the already existing gap in communication. The instructor would not, to be sure, employ the same words or tone in responding directly to an actual student, but the basic attitude expressed bluntly above would somehow have to communicate itself. An actual student would most likely feel a sort of unreasonable, blanket rejection, and it is doubtful that he would wish to put forth much further effort in his later work and try to re-open communication with his instructor.

Because of instructors' lack of awareness of Spanish-English cognate traps, we have progressively seen a mountain rise out of a molehill. One instructor thought that the student had come so to

hate his history professor that when the student writes "I would sure like to finish one career in history," the instructor thought that the student was wishfully contemplating murdering the professor. Apart from certain amusing possibilities inherent in the misuse of cognates, the more serious consequences of the problem would seem to include misdiagnoses entailing subtle, negative attitudinal changes on the part of teachers toward students and vice-versa. The volatile temperament of some of our students, who live in difficult enough circumstances trying to adjust to a new world, might easily translate the unperceived cause of a teacher's lack of comprehension into a false perception of injustice and cultural prejudice. It is a possibility that would be foolish to overstress, but it exists nevertheless.

The invented paragraph is, of course, guilty of exaggeration, but caricature is frequently the best means of drawing attention to a reality. In conclusion, let me offer certain pedagogical suggestions. I suppose that, ideally, instructors of ESL should not only be aware of the latest methodologies in their field but should also be fluent in the native languages of their students. Naturally, their ESL groups should consist only of native speakers of the language(s) with which the instructors are familiar. Homogeneous groupings of ESL students according to native language, however, has not been much in evidence in the City University so far, nor is it likely soon to become administrative policy. In practice, therefore, ESL teachers at CUNY teach mixed groups (of course there are exceptions) and are fortunate rather than typical

if they happen to be fluent in the native languages of their students.

I feel that more bilingual connectedness between ESL teacher and student is in fact needed, but the present deficiency can, I think, be compensated for in great measure by the existence of resource persons among the regular staff of any department committed to teaching ESL. In other words, if the ESL population at any particular school is largely Hispanic or Haitian, then some fulltime members of the interested department should be fluent in Spanish or French and be willing to instruct other members of the ESL staff in the particular problems of vocabulary and structure they are likely to encounter in teaching English composition to speakers of those languages. Such resource persons should make themselves available for consultation when instructors are in doubt about their reading of a passage and suspect cognate or other vocabulary difficulties. Instructors who teach regular English classes in which there happen to be students whose first language is not English would also find value in the presence of such resource persons. Such staff members could develop and distribute lists of cognate traps and other lexical and syntactic aids so that instructors who have to deal with students from a variety of linguistic backgrounds could cope more successfully with the problems peculiar to each linguistic group.

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